

Narrator:

This is an America.gov podcast.

For print versions of articles, multimedia, and subscription information, visit www.america.gov.

Back in 2000, Okolo Rashid had an activist moment — one of many she's had in her life as a community organizer and local-history preservationist in Jackson, Mississippi. As she watched a promotion on television for "The Majesty of Spain: Royal Collections from the Museo del Prado and Patrimonio Nacional," hosted by the Mississippi Arts Pavilion, she noticed a glaring omission from the collection's content – the contribution of Islam to Spanish culture.

Inspired by her Muslim faith, Rashid organized an exhibition in Jackson about Muslim culture in the Iberian Peninsula that opened shortly after The Majesty of Spain exhibit. More than a year later, Rashid's exhibition turned into the International Museum of Muslim Cultures, the first museum in the United States dedicated to educating Americans about Muslim culture. Today, she is the museum's executive director.

Rashid links the desire to enrich fellow citizens' lives to her belief in Islam. She converted to Islam in 1976. Rashid was greatly influenced by the teachings of African-American Muslim leader Warith Deen Mohammed. Mohammed, who died in 2008, took over the Nation of Islam in 1975. Eventually, his organization became the American Society of Muslims, which promotes a positive image of Islam to Americans.

Mohammed's message of respect for human dignity and individual worth resonated strongly with Rashid. The daughter of sharecroppers who grew up in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s, Rashid was active in civil rights and human rights causes. Mohammed's message to African Americans — not only Muslim African Americans — moved her.

Board members of Rashid's mosque in Jackson found that other Jackson-area residents were unhappy with the Spanish exhibition for its omission of Islam. Soon, local academics, politicians and business professionals began to brainstorm with Rashid on how best to educate their community about Islam's contribution to Spanish culture.

Four months after Rashid's idea was conceived, the Islamic Moorish Spain exhibition opened. Rashid estimates about 25,000 people visited during its first six months. Despite warnings from professional exhibition planners that her vision could not be completed in four months to coincide with The Majesty of Spain, Rashid kept her faith and insisted that they try.

Islamic Moorish Spain was set to close on September 30, 2001, but the attacks on September 11 pushed back this date — permanently. Community leaders, including Christian ministers, rallied to the exhibit's cause, seeing the need for Americans to learn about Islam more than ever. This strong response to September 11 became the impetus to transform the exhibit into a museum.

Since then, Rashid's vision has become a permanent feature of Jackson's multicultural scene. The International Museum of Muslim Cultures receives both local and international visitors who learn about Muslim culture through its exhibits. Currently, the museum is hosting an exhibition on the history of Timbuktu, highlighting Islam's importance to African and African-American culture. It features 45 Arabic manuscripts from 14th-century Mali that showcase the sophistication of local African culture.

Narrator:

This podcast is produced by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs. Links to other Internet sites or opinions expressed should not be considered an endorsement of other content and views.